

# CHADD's 20th Annual International HIGHLIGHTS *from*

**I**T WAS TRULY A CALIFORNIA EXPERIENCE: An Olympic champion, star researchers, and celebrity volunteers gathered for a red-carpet conference in Anaheim to focus on the latest and best information about AD/HD. More than 1,200 CHADD members from North and South America, Europe, and the Middle East attended the 20th Annual International Conference on AD/HD held in November. Co-chaired by Anne Teeter Ellison, EdD, and Sharon K. Weiss, MEd, the conference featured something for everyone, with a mix of new evidence-based information, networking, and motivational speaking.



Bruce Jenner emphasizes the race that pushed him to find his inner champion.

Olympian Bruce Jenner, who is affected by AD/HD and dyslexia, inspired a standing ovation simply by walking onto the stage as keynote speaker for the general session. Jenner became a national hero and earned the title “World’s Greatest Athlete” when he won the gold in the 1976 Olympic decathlon. He was genuinely excited by the welcome. “I can identify with this group, with AD/HD and the challenges we face growing up,” Jenner said. “They’re enormous.”

With enthusiasm, Jenner related his journey to the platform in the center of the Montreal Olympic stadium, which he said began while he watched the closing ceremonies for the 1968 games on television. “I’m sitting there with a little tear in my eye, saying ‘Man, wouldn’t that be cool? To go and represent your country?’” he said. “My coach

encouraged me. I went to the Olympics in 1972 and survived with a halfway decent score.”

Jenner said he was drawn to the decathlon because of the rich history of the multi-sport event. He wanted to see where it would take him in life. During the trials for the U.S. Olympic team, he found his “inner champion.” Jenner described his amazement as he proceeded through the rankings to make the top ten—and the team. “It was my personal best time,” Jenner said. “No one was more shocked than I was. I reached down into my soul and found that champion. That race changed my life forever.”

Yet another significant moment occurred after the actual Olympics event. “I saw it from the side—an Olympic gold medal ceremony,” Jenner told the audience. “As I’m standing off on the side, so impressed, and I thought what if I take the next four years of my life, test myself every day, what can I accomplish? I made the conscious, concrete decision about what I wanted from my life.”

Jenner wanted to be on that platform, with the American flag above him and the national anthem playing as he received the gold. His training for that moment started that very night. He moved to San Jose, surrounded himself with the best athletes for each sport of the decathlon and trained every day for the next four years.

“I put myself in an environment where I could grow and learn from other people,” Jenner said. “That’s what makes CHADD such a great organization. You can learn from other people. Do you know how much knowledge is in this room?” It was the champion within that he pulled on and that motivated him for the next four years, Jenner said, comparing his determination to that of the CHADD conference attendees. “Anytime we set our sights high, when we go for it, there is fear,” he said. “But I wouldn’t let fear control my life. I picked it up and put it behind me, pushing me on.”

It wasn’t always that way, he confided. For a young person growing up with dyslexia, there was a great deal of fear. “Being a dyslexic kid, my biggest fear in life was going to school, afraid that the teacher would make me read in class,” Jenner said. “I didn’t want anybody

# Conference on AD/HD ANAHEIM

Attention Staff

to know I had this problem.” A race he won in fifth grade brought Jenner confidence and started him on the path that eventually led to the Olympics. “Sports became very important to me at a young age because I needed that confidence in my life,” he said. “My greatest gift was being dyslexic because it made me good.”

And Jenner was good. The 1976 Olympics, a long way from that fifth-grade race, brought his moment to shine before the world. “It was effortless to run,” he said. “I walked on the field and thought, ‘Oh, it’s going to be a great day.’” During the course of the two-day event, Jenner placed ahead of the other athletes. When the time for the final dash came, he knew it was his last race. He knew he had to enjoy the moment because it would never come again. Crossing the finish line, shouting at the top of his lungs, he knew he was a champion. When the officials led Jenner and the second- and third-place winners out of the stadium tunnel into the arena, he saw his goal: the white platform with the American flag hanging above it.

“Those were the last two steps of my career,” he said. “Once I got to the top, it felt good.” The music played and the crowd cheered. The dyslexic kid who struggled with attention issues was now the champion of the world. Jenner soaked it in. “The official came over and said, ‘You have to get down now,’” Jenner told the CHADD members of his moment of glory. “And I said ‘Nope.’” Jenner was eventually coaxed from the platform and left with his gold.

“I commend CHADD,” Jenner said. “What you do here is extremely important. The number one thing for any kid growing up is self-esteem. That’s why I like CHADD. You’re here to build self-esteem. What CHADD does is give all you people here an arena to play in.”

## Children do well if they can

As CHADD president Marie Paxson greeted keynote speaker Ross Greene, PhD, she told the audience, “I’m introducing him to you, the audience, but I think I should have introduced him to my family years ago.”

Greene, associate clinical professor in psychiatry at Harvard Medical School and author of *The Explosive Child*, explores challenging behavior as a developmental delay. He is the creator of Collaborative Problem Solving, a psychosocial model of treatment for children and young people with behavior difficulties. The program has been used successfully in many different situations, including with families, in schools, inpatient care units, and residential and juvenile facilities.

Greene’s talk struck a poignant note about children with behavior disorders. “We still don’t understand them very well. And we still don’t treat them very well,” he said. “Collaborative Problem Solving is a very different way of understanding challenging kids. It is also a very different way of intervening. It views challenging behavior as



Anne Teeter Ellison, EdD, CHADD’s immediate past president, officially passed the gavel of CHADD leadership to Marie Paxson (left) during the opening plenary session.



Ross Greene, PhD, addresses the audience about his work, which explores challenging behavior as a developmental delay.

a developmental delay, rather than in ways other people often see it, such as attention-getting or manipulation.”

Challenging children often lack crucial thinking skills and experience problems in flexibility, problem solving, and frustration tolerance. “If you think a kid is lacking skills rather than motivation,” Greene said, “you’d be busy going about the task of teaching him the skills he’s lacking.” Collaborative Problem Solving is currently being adopted in a Maine school district. “It’s amazing what happens when adults understand challenging kids better,” Greene said, “and apply interventions that make sense given that understanding.”

### A platform of AD/HD awareness

Twenty-year-old Courtney Gifford will tell you that it’s time to make a difference for people affected by AD/HD. Named Miss Wyoming this past June, Gifford has been traveling around her home state to raise awareness about AD/HD. She will soon take her message to a national audience when she competes for the ultimate prize: Miss America. And of course, with so many young girls with AD/HD falling under the radar, the impact of such high-profile exposure of woman living with disorder goes without saying. This poised young woman ventured to Anaheim to attend the conference because, she says, “CHADD does so much to make a difference for people living with AD/HD. And the amount of information available at this year’s conference is simply amazing.”

First diagnosed with AD/HD after experiencing behavioral problems that led to repeated trips to her school’s detention center, Gifford said, “I had low self-esteem, and I was picked on a lot, so I dealt with a lot of social problems.” In high school she decided to simply stop worrying about what other people think. Encouraged by her boss’s wife, who was active in the Miss Teen Wyoming pageant, Gifford discovered how much she loved competing. And then, during the Miss Wyoming competition, she says, “I discovered that I could use my AD/HD to my advantage and to the advantage of others with the disorder.”

So Gifford balances her time between going to college and serving as a one-woman PR campaign in her home state. She just completed filming a reality show—a component of the Miss America pageant—that will appear on national television in January and lead into the naming of the new Miss America on January 24 in Las Vegas. If she wins, Gifford will show the nation a platform that has been influenced by the CHADD model of offering support on the local level. “I would promote education about AD/HD. And I would then take it a step further. I would take it to the community level to create a safe haven so people can learn about their AD/HD.”

### Latest research on the brain

On the final day of the conference, CHADD hosted its annual Educator’s Day, with a full program of seminars. So it was fitting that Jay Giedd, MD, keynote speaker for the closing general session, began his



Courtney Gifford, Miss Wyoming, will soon take her message about AD/HD to a national audience.

presentation with an acknowledgement of teachers as heroes with the greatest potential impact on the world. Researchers like himself, he said, need to listen to teachers because they know so much more about kids. A practicing child and adolescent psychiatrist and chief of the brain imaging unit at the Child Psychiatry Branch of the National Institute of Mental Health, Giedd conducts research on the biological basis of cognitive, behavioral, and emotional disorders in children. His work has been widely covered in the general media, and he is a frequent national and international lecturer on brain development.

Starting with the 1884 poem about “Fidgety Phil,” Giedd offered social/historical perspectives of our understanding of AD/HD. He elaborated on the promise and limitations of current research

on the prefrontal cortex, changing cortical thickness, implications of the involvement of the cerebellum and the basal ganglia in some cases, studies of twins, genetics, and so forth. The more questions we can answer, such as whether AD/HD is a delay or a deviance, Giedd said, the better able we will be to appropriately treat the disorder and improve lives.

### An educational Exhibit Hall

“Out of resources and out of hope, until I found CHADD,” said Kera Hanley from Lubbock, Texas. “Because of CHADD I am empowered to be an advocate for my brother.” Hanley has been raising her younger brother, who has been struggling with AD/HD for almost seven years, and she too was diagnosed just a few months ago. Asked how she felt about the conference, she replied, “It’s like a big, giant hug.”

Attendees throughout the exhibit hall remarked on the sense of camaraderie and connection at conference. This can be an uncommon experience for so many affected by AD/HD—the opportunity to look someone in the eye, discuss experiences with AD/HD, and actually be understood. Booths lined up with companies, schools and people who have one common purpose: to offer new methods and different tools in overcoming AD/HD. Parents listened intently to exhibitors and physicians discuss the latest research, and old friends reunited. All this energy created an invigorating environment in the Exhibit Hall, a place where attendees said they were shown roads to success, found hope instead of fear, felt a sense of belonging versus isolation. Anyone dealing with AD/HD knows how invaluable these things truly are. ●

**CHADD is already looking forward to next year’s conference in Cleveland, Ohio. In the February issue, *Attention* will bring you more 2008 conference coverage, highlighting attendees and the annual awards.**

*Attention* staffers **Bryan Goodman, Susan Buningh, and Karen Sampson,** and special correspondent **Melinda McNaughton** contributed to this article.